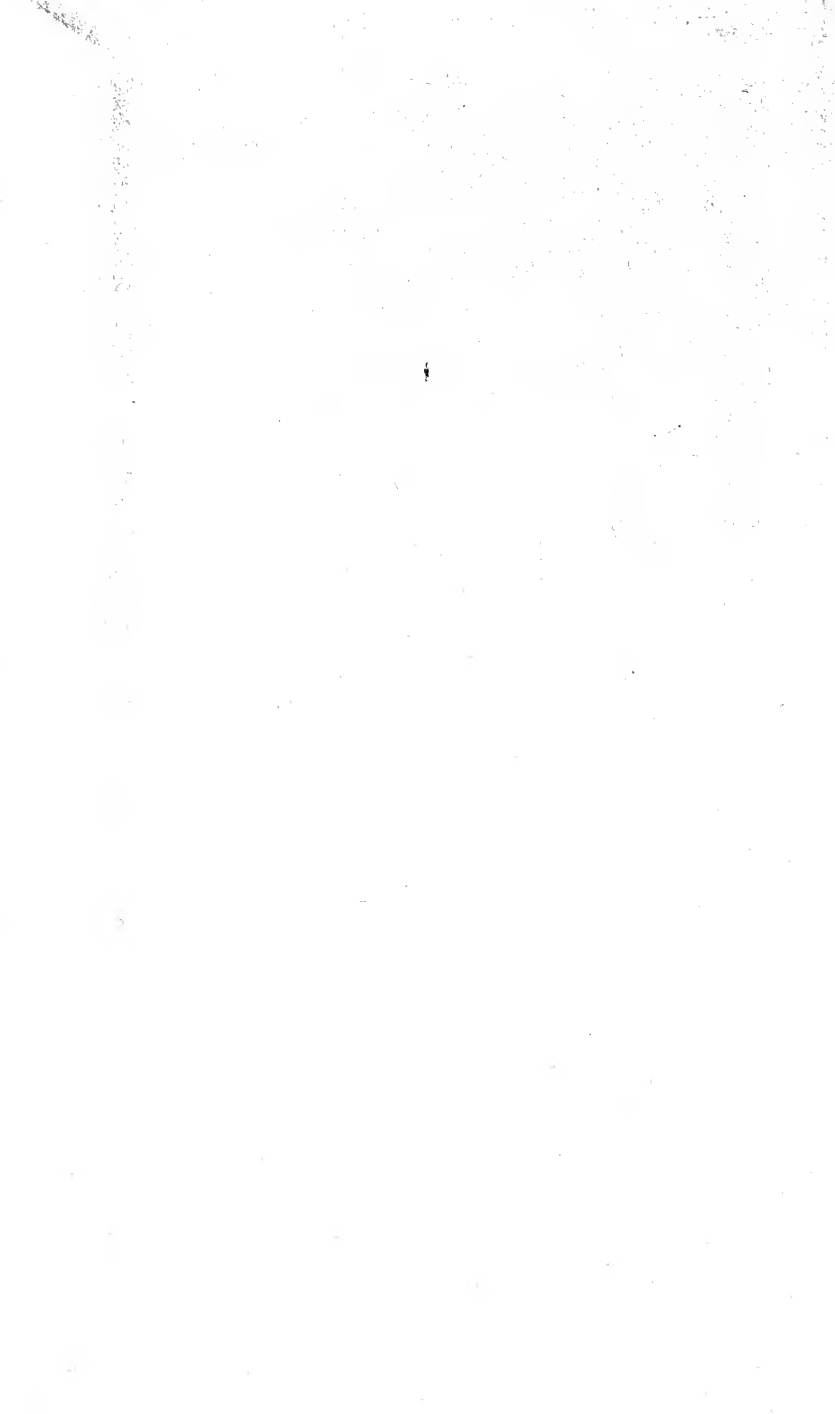


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IRONICA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

DISCORDS

SONNETS FROM THE PATAGONIAN

TWO DEATHS IN THE BRONX

NINE POEMS FROM A VALETUDINARIUM

IRONICA

BY

DONALD EVANS

NEW YORK
NICHOLAS L. BROWN
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*EXCHANGING SEVEN STRIPES
FOR A BAY LEAF*

*Now that we are done with the picturesque
extravagance of War, it is meet we
should turn to the sober thrift
of poetry*

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AT THE BAR

To

Witter Bynner

AT THE BAR

NEW YORK was waking to another dawn;
The morn was May; a silence lay like snow
Outside the door at Jack's, where revelry
Had gone to sleep, with a last taxicab
Moored in a battered patience at the curb.

Two figures, garbed in night's suave black and white,
Made through the door, and drank the virgin air
As an old wine after a long parched thirst,
Spent among phantom bottles with no necks.

Both men were young, the younger with the green
Nimbus of youth, poised for brave enterprise.—

“Let's get to bed,” yawned from the older one.
“Cambridge would frown to see her trusted sons

Go lurching home, two ghosts of last night's dance.”—
Sixth Avenue gave them its unthronged way,
And with a glittering stride they headed north.

At the first crossing Something stopped them short—

A Thing of rags and sores and evil smells,
Undried stale tears and slobbering torn mouth—

A derelict far too decayed to die—
Rose from the pave and hung there asking alms.

There was no path to pass him for the pair,

Although disgust had found them winged heels.

A shudder dimmed the golden youth; he turned
To his companion, "Have you ten dollars left?

Lend it me quick."—And he addressed the Thing:
"If I give you this money will you buy

Enough raw whiskey to make sure an end
To your foul body? Will you do it, man?"—

There was no answer, the Thing did not hear;
Ten dollars or a dime—what difference?

Money meant rum, and rum meant ease to pain,
All that was left now of the pulse of life.

But when the orange bill met the red eyes
He gave a gulp, staring incredulous,

While his hand shook to snatch the mocking wealth.
In the olden days he would have done quick work—

Strangled the two, and pocketed the ten.
But there it crackled only another bruise

From a cold world where drink was hard to find.—
"Speak up, old hulk! Are you not tired of this?

Why not complete the wreck, and sink with it?
It can be done on what this gift will buy.

I mean it, as I live. Here it is yours;
March straight to the first groggery, and make
Of your insides a final conflagration—

A good day's work for you and for the world!
Likely the best you've done in all your years."—
Somewhere within the Thing one nerve yet lived,
An instant still of sentience, and it ran
A spark of understanding through his frame,
And sound came from the human effigy:
"Give me the money—I'll do what you want."—
And his mouth twitched with fear till it was his;
No sooner had he clutched it than he fled,
His rags a-flutter in the May-day breeze,
Pursued by Terror bent on robbing him.—
"Lord Bountiful turned cynic, so it seems,"
The older man smiled wearily. "Now come,
You have your mordant curtain to your play."—
A wary ashen laugh was the reply,
As they locked arms, and headed north again;
Soon they had faded in the enfolding light.

His name, when he had had a name, was Steve—
Steve Snyder,—though none now remembered it.
He had not used it, nor had anyone,
For longer count than he could put together
Of dateless years. He was too near the grave

He was not fit for to be called by name,
Even as a dog is called. Mostly he went
Unseen because too foul a sight to see.

Past fifty he was tarrying after death,
Forgotten by the wielder of the shears.

His parents were a shapeless drunken drab
And a stray driver, meeting in the dark,
And darkness nursed him through his babyhood.

The child grew man because a pair of legs
Had carried him to vagrant foragings.

Then he swept barroom floors, and fresh or stale

The fumes had drenched him with a dumb content,
And likewise a vain longing to drink more
Than he could ever buy or ever drink.

One summer he had been a circus clown,
But the bar sawdust was his destiny.

There was a light at the Avenue's far end—

A different light than any Steve had seen;
And yet not different, for behind the mist
That filmed the remnant of his memory

He saw the same flame, gutted by the haze.

Dazed he stopped short, and looked down at the bill
There in his hand, as though it had the key;

And painfully he probed for the dead ends
Of his five senses.—What did this money mean?—

What starved hope did the donor's words bring back?—
Along the blind trail slowly he groped his way;
At last there was a turn, and he was there.—
Peace was the money's promise.—He might die . . .

He then remembered it as the last dream
To perish, leaving blank his misery.

More than two years before, when he had lost
The broken brute's capacity for work

Among the dregs of toil, he had had a dream.
He found five dollars lying in the street,

And it had bought him rum for one great bout.
He had drunk and drunk till he could think no more,

Safe in a little shanty on a pier
On the East River. All alone he was,

And when the moment gleamed he had no fear;
He heard a voice within the light that sang,

While steadily he walked to the wharf's end,
And mingled with the river at full tide.

Here was it all come true; the fortune his—
It sobered him, and then it made him weak,
And he sank on a doorstep heavily.

Steve knew just such a pier to serve his need,
With a deserted shed to shelter him.
But there was much to do ere he could find
A haven there. He must get a good sleep first
To clear his head of the tremors and the fog
That held him helpless when he tried to think.
Yet if he slept too deep it was as bad ;
He would wake numb, racked with that retching cough
That never let him be for long alone.
After he slept he would try coffee first
Before he crawled to buy eternity.
It worried him a little how to make
His purchase of a dozen quarts of rum.
Would it be whiskey, or was gin the best ?
Gin was the cheaper, but a dozen quarts
Of whiskey would mean three days at the least.
That was enough. He could not ask for more.
Where would he buy it ? He must settle that.
Not two squares from the pier was a saloon ;
He would make two trips, six bottles at a time,
From bar to shanty ; then he could bolt the door.
He looked down at himself, and a vague wish
That he might have a bath rose to his lips :
“I might feel better.”—But he shook his head :

“It would take too long. And I can’t spare the cash.

Ten dollars ain’t a bank.”—And he got up
Ready to seek the hole where he might sleep
Till sottishness was packed down tighter still
Within the sodden flesh that harboured him.

He was a haunting pilgrim in the cleansed
May morning light that shone so pitiless—
His clothes were scarcely clothes, and his hard filth
Robbed him of the pathos of decline.

He had been tall, and now he was not bent,
But rather shrunk to a bleared pulpiness.
His hair had lost all colour, and it spread
A matted waste; a stained beard hid his chin.

String tied his coat and trousers to his frame,
With layer on layer of newspaper beneath.
His shoes were almost new, yet were not mates.

One might have been a fop’s; its pointed box
Pleaded forlornly for deliverance,
While the other was an honest workman’s boot.

The footgear was the single comic note
That gave the scarecrow authenticity.—
Steve felt the miles of flinty pavement stretch
An unconquerable distance, cheating him

Of a safe hiding place, but he kept on,
Making the two goals one, for the saloon
Had a dark cellar, which was seldom used,
Where he could creep to doze for half a day.—
His shadow crossed Fifth Avenue; the breeze
Ferried it swiftly over the radiant stream.

Halfway to the East River a cold sweat
Taunted his passion; down again he sank,
And this time with a blackness in his eyes.—
“Oh, hell; I can’t die now. Not yet. Not now,”
He feebly whispered, as a man might pray.
He fought for breath while the cough strangled him,
And each weak inhalation seemed the last,
Bought with the ultimate ion of energy.—
Nearby a cat played with a mouse; the hour
Hinted of idle moribundity.—
Steve called to a child, “You, get me a drink,”—
And when she brought it took it at one gulp,
And cursed the giver with returning breath.
He pieced out where he was, how far he had come,
And how much of his journey yet remained,
But whether he would last he did not know.
He counted up the squares; they seemed to run

To the world's other end. He cursed once more,
A tired whine of aimless profanity.

It roused him to his feet for homeward bound,
And so he reached the tavern near the pier.

The cellar door came open to his tug,
And down he slipped into the darkling damp.

He found a corner with a pile of straw,
Beside three barrels, that offered company.

He pulled the straw together for his head,
And then with a low groan lay down to sleep.

The groan was for his fear he might not wake
To drink the whiskey now so nearly his.

It was not time yet for the final sleep
That would return him to the silences.

A bit of luck had brought Steve his first job
In a saloon when he was turned sixteen.

The publican had watched him whip a lad,
And saw in his hard fists and chancy eyes

A worker he might train for later on.

At first, he was apprenticed to a mop,

And every day made the floor shine as new,
Wiped off the tables, polished the brass rail,

And helped the ice men pack the cooling coils.
One day he found a glass three-quarters full,
Forgotten on the bar, and drank it off.

A glow lighted his frame, and straightened him;
He lost his ever-present hunger pinch,
And strength ran through his body like a warmth;
The bar seemed at a distance, yet quite near,
And sound was in his ears now loud, now soft.

But what was strangest was that fear was gone;
He need no longer cringe to anyone.

No one could hurt him. The world was a new place,
And he was glad to be a part of it.

Boyhood had taught him life was mostly flight,
Or fight with no chance of winning. Always odds
Lay with the man who had a home, while he
Had found obscurity his only shield.

He longed to shout the chorus of some song,
While he did the rail—but why do the rail?

Why work to-day when he had just got free?
He plunged the mop into the dripping pail,
And with wild glee flung water savagely

In a whip stream until his arms were tired.

He saw the barman pass to the back room,
Leaving ajar the cash register drawer.

Money was there within Steve's easy reach,
And noiselessly he slipped behind the bar—

A furtive hand closed on a roll of dimes,—
And in a flash he was outside in the street.

He heard a band, and soon he was mixed with it,
Marching along, the sidewalk drum major,

With the dimes burning in his tight-shut fist.
Springtime had brought the Circus back to town,

And he could follow it the morning long,
Till it had wound through endless streets; at last,

Returning to the Garden; even then
He need not be barred out; he had money now,

And he could see the show like other boys.—
He took a deep breath facing this novel fact,

And bought some candy at a peddler's cart,
Just to be sure that he was wide-awake.—

The glow of the first drink had nearly gone
When the parade was over, but the smell

That fed his nostrils as he reached the Garden,
Strange odours of still stranger animals,

And the thick and push of the engulfing crowd

Started fresh buzzing in his brain. The line
That was then forming at the ticket booth
Was much too tedious; he plunged in ahead,
And paid with kicks and cuffs as well as coin
For the red pasteboard that took him inside.
He scarcely saw the spectacle itself,
For it sent him dreaming. What it was he dreamt
He could not have told, but it was snug and good.
And he was sorry when the thrill of thrills
Had done its thrillingest, and the crowd moved
Toward the exit in an amber eve.

Saloon jobs after that came thick and fast
In the next five years, for no one kept him long.
His eyes were on the bottle, and they ranged
Not far as long as liquor was in reach.
The reason for existence meant to Steve
The cultivation of a larger thirst,
And a fierce shunning of sobriety.
He did not feel himself till he had drained
A glass of whiskey straight to start the day,
And his legs grew tired if too much time elapsed
Before another briskly followed it.
His pride kept pace with his capacity,

And he achieved his manhood gulp by gulp.—
He saw the world expanding in his vision,
For he was ever dreaming. Dreams were safe,
And always worked out as he wished them to;
Safer than life at hand, which sometimes failed,
With its never-absent peril of a drought.—
He did not get beyond the pail and mop
And the brass rubbing of the detaining rail;
But at rare moments longing carried him
Behind the bar where he found paradise.—
It was his concept of well-ordered life,
And brief ambitions made him masterful
To move among the cleanliness, clear-eyed,
With a bartender's easy dominance
And tolerance of human frailty,
As long as it can pay.—Sometimes he leaned
Over the bar for hours with his gaze
Fawning upon the rows of polished glass,
The bottles that had come from foreign lands,
The shining copper troughs, the running streams
Of fresh, cold water, the neat piles of peel
Cut and ready for the fancy tipple.
It was all as it should be, right as rain,
And he longed to take his place there, sleek and shaved,

With spotless apron to protect his clothes,
Clothes that were pressed, and linen white and new,
Cocked for the newest comer, "What will you have?"—

Often at night beyond the closing time

Steve would remain, after his work was done,
To feast on the bar's immaculateness,

While leisurely he drained his hidden jug
Of hoarded liquor vigilantly saved

From the lees of glasses he had pounced upon
Whenever a guarding hand had strayed too far.

And if he were alone that was the best,
For then there was his stomach's fill to filch.

When he had drunk enough, and his eyes glared,
And the place was his, or quite as good as his,

He would squat behind the bar in the dim light,
Shielded from passing watchmen by the length

And height and breadth of the mahogany,
Which was more than wood when turned into a bar.

His stare would take each object in its turn,
And everything would taunt his tattered state

With its large measure of efficiency.
He saw it as the hope beyond his reach—

His real place in the ranks of publicans—

And then he would start weeping for his plight.

Yet if he owned the bar he might not drink
All that he wanted, for they seldom did.

That was the price they paid for ownership,
And the privilege of day-long idleness,
With well-fed power in each word and glance.

It was a funny world—if he would drink,

He must be vermin among other men.

If he would conquer men he must not drink,

But watch them guzzle what he thirsted for.—

Was anything like whiskey?—that was it!

What was it for, if not for him to taste?

Let them live with their vats, grow fat and rich—

But he knew better—life was not for long,

And drinking was the only thing worth while.

What fools were the bartenders! They were slaves
That did the bid of everyone who called.

He would not stand all day to pour and draw

When his own throat was always aching dry,—

And if he must be vermin, then he must.—

Once when he had awakened in a cell

There lurked a looming fear behind the blur

Of what the night before had seen. He had

Been in a fight; that much he could recall,
And a bandaged head bore out his memory.

His head ached, and the menace of his fear
Kept growing louder till he beat the bars

To bring the turnkey. He must know the charge.
The keeper came.—“What am I in for now?”

Steve then demanded, and his tone was tense,
Rasped by raw nerves. The turnkey saw a chance
To have some precious fun.—“You croaked a man.
Come now; get a move on. Your case is first.”—

Steve’s heart went white; he warded off the blow,
With one arm raised to shield his bloated face.—

“God, no!” he moaned, while the cell door swung back,
And the keeper called him to the corridor.

Outside the hearing room Steve found a bench,
And crouched there, with his head between his hands.

The keeper saw his jest was working well,
And whispered to some cronies standing near.

One silently went out, and then returned,
And in a voice that Steve was meant to hear

Said, “He’s just died in Bellevue. It’s the chair.”—
Steve leaped up trembling, “Did I kill a man?”—

His hands were pleading on the turnkey’s sleeve
To unsay the dire news that threatened him.

He was rare sport—the best in many a day,
And the law's guardians kept at their good work
Till their victim was a shaking heap of sobs
On the stone floor. And when his name was called
He did not hear it, and still in a maze
He stood before the magistrate, nor knew
That he was freed, after a reprimand
For being drunk, till he was thrust outdoors,
When he was told that it was Christmas Day.

He had one struggle with his comforter,
And for awhile he held his own alone,
While the ironic Madams faintly smiled.—

He had struck up acquaintance with a clown
Down on his luck, and had befriended him,
Finding for him a seat and sanctuary
In a saloon's back room. The two had talked,
And the upshot was the clown proposed that they
Pal up together in a circus job.

The clown told Steve he would teach him all he knew,
And Steve had felt an earthquake in his breast,
Volcanic rumblings that had set him free,—
Or so he thought, and he agreed to try.

They found a circus, and the clown taught Steve

Till he was ready for his white-faced rôle.

He liked the life, and clung to his resolve
To drink no more. Out in the sawdust ring
He found the crowd intoxicated him
With a new drunkenness. Their laughter rang
Sweet in his ears. A sense of vast release
Came to him with the slapstick comedy.

And he regretted that he could not keep
His clown's suit on him when he went to bed,
For he grew outside himself behind his mask,
And he forgot the derelict that was.

He worked hard, a dæmonic drollery
Touched up his antics with a flash of art—
The smoulder of a lorn rebelliousness.
His mates ignored him, for they thought him queer
And mulish, and he kept much to himself,
Spending long hours alone in the big tent.

Romance was born out of this solitude.—
Mlle. Aurora, who had legs of iron,
And jumped through paper hoops aloft a horse,
Was piqued by Steve's absorption and his lack
Of manly curiosity about herself;
So she set out to pierce his mystery.—

She followed him into the empty tent,
And teased him for his solitariness.

She let him see her eyes were blue and big—
Albeit veterans of the public stare,—

And made her voice drop confidentially,
While she purred against his shoulder with her hip.

Hers was a poor moth-eaten coquetry
That would not have deceived her aged horse,
But it was new to Steve, and very strange.

His ears had never heard a woman's voice

Pitched low in syllables of friendliness,
And he was a quick victim. Her strong frame

And her hard fearless face that knew the world
Made her seem fashioned from some nobler mould

Than had made him or those that he had known.
She took her seat beside him while he talked,

And when he felt her nearness and her eyes
Fixed full upon him for a longer time

Than anyone had ever looked at him,
His tongue grew eager for unbosoming,

And under her keen questioning she heard
In a few minutes all she wished to know;

Then she got up, and she was through with him.
But this was not the end of it for Steve,

Nor did he know that she was through with him,
For she had just begun. He followed her
While she led off her horse.—“You’ll come again,”
He faltered, “for I like to talk to you.”—
For answer the Aurora tossed her head
Aurorally, and vanished through the flap.

Life had a real meaning now for Steve—
She gave his thoughts new colour and a focus,
And he pursued her dumbly, doggedly.
His clowning showed fresh zest, as though he strove
To win an approving smile from royalty.
She offered scant encouragement, but found
His worship made of him a willing slave
To run her errands, so she bore with it,
Until the troupe began to raise a laugh
Over Steve’s suit. That irritated her,
And when that afternoon he clumsily
Bumped into her after her riding act,
She smartly boxed his ears, and laid her whip
With a cat’s quick hiss across his shoulder blades.
Because he gave no sign except surprise
It angered her the more, and she let loose
A flood of hot words that left Steve awake.—

They were the words that he had always heard,
Driving him from human companionship,
To herd with fugitives and animals.

He slunk away, and did not sleep that night,
Pondering his trouble. Just before the dawn
He stole a bottle from a neighbouring bed,
Drained the full quart, and shook himself to rage.—

Stealthily then he crept out in the air,
And seeing all was quiet sought the tent
Where the Aurora slept. Under the flap
He scraped a pile of hay, and lit a match
To start a bonfire in his lady's honour,
And make the others long remember him.

The show was camping by the railroad tracks,
And Steve heard a freight whistling coming near.

He ran to meet it, and not till he had
Jumped on a flat car did he look behind,
And there he saw the Aurora's tent in flames.

Steve woke in the darkness, with the smell of rum
Bidding him rise, yet it was smothering him.—
How many hours had passed he could not tell,

But it was night,—his night of all the nights.
He struggled to his feet, and rubbed his eyes
To brush away his drowse. He could not think
Till he had quit the cellar. Next he felt
For the ten dollars, but it was not there.—
One pocket—then another—while his heart
Beat out his toll of doom should it be gone.
He fell upon his knees, and clutched a rung
Of the cellar steps.—Tears and slobber poured
Over the dirty stubble of his chin,
While he pounded at the door of balked desire.—
Were the money lost the coming was in vain,
And he must go on living till the end—
The end that would never come. There was no end,
As there was no beginning. Suddenly—
He gave a sharp cry and tore off his shoes;
There in the pointed toe he felt the bill.—

He climbed up through the trap-door to the street,
And breathed the peace that was to come to him
With the white moon. It had come. . . It was here. . .
There was the bar, and nought could thwart him now;
He had strength again, the sleeping had done that.
He drew up to full height, and let escape

A little sigh, for he was satisfied.—

He walked down to the pier, and found his shed
Empty and waiting, just the place to hide,

While drop by drop the bottles took him home.—
He cleared a shelf for them, and made a seat

Out of three boxes, where he might lie down,
And reach out to the shelf, and never move.

The moon would give him light enough to see,
And soon he would not have to see at all.

Finally he finished; slowly he went back
Toward the saloon for his last word with man.

With a new fearlessness he pushed the door
Wide open, and came, head up, to the bar.—

“Whiskey,” he said, but his voice shook a trifle
As the bartender eyed him hostilely.

Then he pulled out the bill, and said, “I want
Twelve quarts for this. Tie them in two bundles,

And I’ll have a drink while you are getting it.”—
The bartender took the money, looked at it,

And then at Steve; then at the bill again.—
“Get the hell out of here, you stinking bum,”

He growled, and glared at Steve across the bar.—
“But”—Steve began.—“Get out, I said; get out.”—

And the bartender turned and laid the bill

Safe out of Steve's reach on the shelf behind.—

“Still here? I'll throw you out, if you don't go.”—
Steve felt the bar was falling.—“Where's my ten?”

He whispered as he cowered.—“It stays here,”
Snapped the reply. “You found an easy mark,
But I'm a match for any pickpocket.

I'll keep this ten-spot; my wife likes clean bills.

Now out you go.”—And three quick strides he took,
Lifted Steve by the shoulders like a cur,
And flung him out the door.

Steve lay there still
Beside a refuse barrel. . . . The scavengers
Found him next morning when they made their rounds.

IRONICA

To

Lloyd R. Morris



FOR MY OLD NURSE DEAD

LIGHT that she never lost again
She drew from disillusion;
A late-won peace come out of pain
That softened Time's intrusion.
Ere she went blind she had not seen
What strength in weakness there had been;
Or that the right road lay between
The paths of her confusion.

When there was nothing else to choose
She found the quiet quelled her.
The hours she could no longer use
Revealed the truth that held her.—
Alone at last she met a friend
Who stayed with her unto the end,
And spoke low words that she could blend
How death toward life impelled her.

SHRINES OF UNLOVELINESS

BEAUTY in a woman is a moving thing,
Yet sometimes just the patient lack of it
Will pierce the heart to deeper poignancies,
And, melting, draw a note of tenderness
That not the fairest woman could evoke!

DUST UNTO DUST, BUT NEVER HER DUST WITH
MINE

AND she became a stranger suddenly,
Just as all men were strangers; then he knew
Why she must be an alien, even she!

Since there was nought her mortal love could do
To give him the last access to her soul.

Returning came his years as wholly vain—
Repeated payment of inutile toll

To reach a shore he would not seek again.
It scarcely left him sad to find how wrong
Had been his vision of her womanhood—
This yearning that had ached in him so long,
For a full mingling of their separate blood.

Freed, solitary now, with unscared eyes
He looked anew at life, safe from surprise!

GREYSTONE GATE

LOYAL and lovely,
She, in a bride-mist,
Waits for her husband
At their first dusk-tryst. . .

Hers is the missing
Grace in his striving—
Drawing his man's heart
Home by her wiving!

FAILURE AT FORTY

HE saw there was no choice to left or right—
Time that had marked him for the least of sages
Pointed the hour, though several blotted pages
Stood witness to the struggle in the night.
Behind him lay a happiness that might
Have made him shine a figure through the ages;
Before him loomed a toiling at small wages,
Alternative to sinking out of sight.
This much was sure—he never need retrace;
The leagues that he had travelled were an ending.
There wound no footpath to a sun-lit place,
Where he might nurse his dreams, with peace attending.
No promised joy would quicken the day's pace,
Nor write the past a blunder still worth mending!

CINQUAINS FOR THE UNWED

AT night,
When the rain fell,
In a mean lunchroom's light
He watched poor girls the fates foreknell
To blight.

There came
Always a dream:
To give each one his name,—
That bridehood's mirage they might deem
Acclaim!

THE EXILE WALL

NEVER any more to see her face;
Nor is that the worst that might befall—
The exile wall.

The voice of beauty tells the last disgrace
With not a trace
Of hatred.—O the pity of it all!

Never any more to see the sun—
Faith like a flame in her believing eyes
Warmed the vast skies
That domed the new-made world love had begun,
And half had won—
Yet nothing dooms him from the grim Assize!

AFTER A TWO-HOUR DINNER

WATCHING his ancient hostess eat,—
The pessimist, with baffled brain,
Saw her eyes gleam at the roast meat,
Or when the plates were changed again.
He marvelled at her happiness;
She begged of life no more than this—
Her joy in food was measureless;
It was her blessing and her bliss.

And half in envy, half in scorn
He knew her with an ultimate
Mind as blank as a babe's just born,
Clinging to breath that she might sate
Soul and senses in unison,
All human glory gluttoning.—
Was her content a victory won?
The coffee left him wondering.

WITHOUT BENEFIT OF SURGERY

WHEN the stars out of pity of pain
 Flashed a hymn in her honour,
 Pride knew she had not loved in vain,
 Though her pangs were upon her.—
And with Fearlessness hailed as the sire
 There was none to deny her
Joy of Paradox, child of desire,
 Who would soon be laid by her.

How Contempt was the father of three
 When the Ideal believed him,
And Indifference was first, Irony,
 Coming next, half retrieved him—
With Inertia the last of her brood—
 Ere the woman revolted
Is a tale for too mordant a mood,
 If the door be not bolted.

Lo! Sir Paradox grew up a fop,
 Yet so brave was his bearing
That Maid Irony let her eyes drop,
 And wed him for his daring.

From the flame of this glittering pair,
Blazed of love without tissue,
Came grave Patience to shine as the heir,
And impeccable issue!

NATURE'S COWARDICE

IT runs round to full circle either way:
We yield to Nature, or we conquer her—
Our will Promethean or sinister—
And still we have not very much to say.

She loves the ideal but little more than they
Who fear the intellect. Blind astral whir
That hates the brain above the human blur,
And clings to darkness lest light lead astray.

PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

LIFE can be borne—the crowning victory
Gives less than the least guerdon of defeat.
For as the fruitage of philosophy
He finds a cell which proves a safe retreat!

NIHIL HIC NISI CARMINA DESUNT

HE gazed upon the crowd, and hung his head—
I could just catch what piteously he said:
“O Lord, make me an animal instead!”

KANTEAN LOVE

THE passion of pure reason was their bond—
And they found life an ardour of the mind
That led them to the world's verge and beyond,
For they were kith to none of humankind—
They sought the First Cause and what lay behind!

FAREWELL TO WINE

SOME must be sober then to grow the vine,
And some to tread the press; others to sell
The fluid flame that lights the invisible,
And pours over fear a purple anodyne.—
None who has known the charity of wine,
Its pity, the cool logic of its spell
Will waver in his loyalty, or dwell
In any heaven where the grape lacks a shrine.
Yet from the vineyard sounds the recurrent call—
How may we drink unless the workers till?
Those who love best the cup must come the first
To set the tendrils climbing up the wall.—
There is no gate to escape the encircling Will
That consecrates me to the quenchless thirst!



BEFORE THE CURTAIN

To

Amy Lowell



BEFORE THE CURTAIN

LADIES and gentlemen, you liked my play?—
It seems so from this endlessness of flowers
That makes my stage look like a florist shop.

Beyond the footlights you gleam friendly-wise,
And your eyes welcome me—an alien player—

To Broadway, which weighs coldly ere it cheers
The aspirant who dares its barriers.

Patricia Talbot offers you her thanks,
As she gives you her art, the best she has.

And if she find no gay, responsive smile
For bowing to your generous approval,

Remember that she is an oldish woman
With an oldish heart that will not wildly beat,
Even in this hour of triumphancy.

I would far sooner cry weak, childish tears,
Safe in the stillness of my dressing room. . .

I had died to taste this night ten years ago—

The crowded house, with not a vacant chair—
The field of faces, swayed and held by me—

Your silence telling more than your applause
Of Talbot's creeping nearer to her goal.

Three calls on my first act, five the second,

Fourteen for the third, and the last curtain
Proves you still clamorous to have more of me.

I came among you unknown and alone
Six weeks ago, rented this theatre
With my last sou, and lured a company
To follow me to glorious disaster.

I had no brand-new drama smart and spiced,
Written to fit me by a famous pen ;
But only five old plays you might have seen
When you were children, and I mounted them
With sets that Sarah Siddons may have used.

Our opening night twelve persons honoured us,
And seven of them were critics who must come.

The several who wrote anything made mots
On the larger house behind the curtain-line.—

Another actress with no sense of humour
Afflicting the poor public. A good shopgirl
Ruined and out of place upon the stage!—

I did not mind ; we had our rôles to play ;

I was too busy in the thick of it
To have a thought of failure, for it was

New York at last, say what they would of me,
And I was gambling for the highest stakes.

The first three weeks our fortunes did not mend—
A yawning emptiness night after night.

The company lost heart, and came to me;
There were no salaries, and I could not blame—

My great adventure was not their concern.
So I pawned my jewels to keep us from the rocks,
And hung my fate upon the next three weeks.—
Just for myself I had no fear at all,

I breathed a happiness I had not known
In my whole life. When the night's work was done
I walked through Central Park to my hotel,
And in the darkness whispered to my heart:

“Your chance has come, and you must win your fight,
Else the long struggle was a waste of soul

And brain and body. Fate will see you through.”—
The fourth week was the turning, though the worst

In point of business, for by chance it brought
A critic who spoke up for me in print.—

Here was an actress who forgot herself,
He wrote, and was the character she played,

And nothing but that character. She worked
In three dimensions, but suggested four,

And let her audience hear the words she thought,
As well as spoke. That was true art.—This lured

Another critic and a few brave souls,
Belonging to that irreducible
Minimum who dream of what the stage might be,
If ever bathos should be self-consumed.

They made of me a cause, ran up my flag,
And rallied all the avid theorists

Of what the drama should be and is not.
They got me talked about, and business grew,

I was worth seeing as a novelty—
Till this last week has made me almost vogue.

To-night, which would have been my closing night,
If I had failed, brings me your flowers instead. . .

This is my thirty-fourth year on the stage,
But never had I played New York before.

That was the promise and the large reward
I kept first in my mind to urge me on

Through the long bitterness of unsuccess.
When I was but a child, my hair still down,

I made my début with a travelling troupe
That visited our town. My father raged,

And caned me, for he was a Godly man.
My mother wept, but I did not repent,

And when the troupe moved on I went with them.
I had all sorts of parts, from aged queens

Down to mere children, in my novice years.
When I was eighteen I came to New York
For the first time, and with a fluttering heart
Tried for a foothold here. All ways were barred—
No manager would give me even a bit.
I had no beauty and that spelled my doom.
My clothes were travel-worn, and my voice shook.
Mine was no great assurance. I was scared;
The city frightened the plain country girl.—
Yet I had something—what I did not know—
That would not quite let me admit defeat.
I vowed to myself that I would not give up,
If it took a lifetime, until I had won
My place as the first actress in the world;
Then I went with a travelling troupe again.—
This first rebuff, though it hurt me, did not harm;
It made me study harder, and I held
My heart a little tighter in its place.
For years this was my story. . . Now and then,
I came back to New York to meet once more
The same old disappointment. In the end
I ceased to be disappointed, for I knew
I had the sacred fire here in my breast,

Although I was not a big-eyed flaxen doll

With a baby face.—Awkwardness was gone,
With the trembling voice and all my early doubts;
A patience came to gird my womanhood.

I could not get a hearing. What had I done?—

“Repertoire actress, and you’re getting old;
My dear, there would be no leading parts for you.

Broadway is not the road. Where have you been
That you are not twinkling, if you are a star?”—

This was the answer that I knew by heart
And meanwhile I was growing nearer fifty.

I could not delay much longer; I saw that,
So I resolved that I should star myself;

And for three years I toiled at leads in stock
Fifty-two weeks a year to save enough

To come back for a last trial on my own.

Perhaps, you now have made me one of you,

And I may read my name blazing at night
In two-foot letters over the theatre.—

After the third act I received an offer
From one of your producers, who would be

An artist if he dared—for he likes art
When someone has explained it to him first,

And has convinced him it will really pay.—
Curiously, art can be made to pay,
If you go about it with a heavy hand.—
Our impresario sent me a note,
Scribbled in the foyer; he is very kind,
And finds in me such genius he will fold
His shining wings around me for four years—
I may be an illuminant, if I choose.—
Yet this producer I had tried to see
A score of times, but never passed the rail
In his outer office. Always Cerberus,
Reincarnated in a perfumed youth,
Brought me back word that he was far too busy.—
And I have just been told that I may pick
From other offers. Fortune smiles on me,
And would make me her darling tardily.

I hope I am not ungracious, my dear friends,
Nor yet ungrateful for the proffered prize—
You touch me deeply by your friendliness,
And something in my throat tells me that joy
Is struggling hard within me to get free.
I do not scorn my triumph, but, alas!
It comes too late, I fear. I have grown chilly.

I cannot bear joy now. My soul is young,
But my tired body and I are very old.—
When I had youth you would not have me then.
I could cheat age, and give you heroines
With all the fine peach bloom of innocence,
And freshness with the dew still glistening.
I could be youth, portray it perfectly,
The living, breathing, visual counterpart,
And you would think I was a miracle—
For I am more than merely a good actress;
I am an artist, and art does not age one,
Until it kills one in the full pulse-beat.—
But all the while I should know I was old,
And that the hour had passed to feel my rôles,
To be alive in the woman that I played.
This inescapable mockery would beat
Cruelly at my brain till I went mad,
For Time has beckoned me. My hair is grey—
Should I then dye it to deny the fact?
And make myself a hideous spectacle—
In the end to win your pity and your smiles?
The poet Evans wrote it in a sonnet;
“Portrait of Mme. Hyssain,” it is called:

*She was tired to tears, and yet there were no tears,
Only the dead seas of indifference
Meeting the languors of a nerveless sense,
For she had played the rôles for twenty years.
The queen called for her satins, while the drab
Demanded love, and the wild hunger tore;
The woman raged to touch the flame once more,
But the worn-out emotions could not stab.*

*There were the thousand parts she had essayed,
And the three thousand gowns that she had worn.
Into the ragbag each frock found its flight,
Crumpled and ravished of a regnant shade,
And every script is wandering forlorn,
Gnawed by the mirage of an opening night.*

Or I could take maturer rôles to play,
As do my sisters, who will not step down;
But that would never satisfy my heart,
For I have sacrificed too much to count
A partial victory as real recompense,
Or hold that ground-bruised fruit my golden apple.—
I have crushed my personal life relentlessly

To make it subject to my art's demands.
I have been deaf to love, and now I ache
To feel the arms that I shall never feel,—
And I shall be alone until I die,
Alone with triumph, which becomes defeat
To sting me. . .

Yet I had to make the fight
To prove I was an artist. Since I have
I have fulfilled my destiny, and paid
My debt to my ambition. I am free
Henceforth to be a lustreless old woman
With hearth-fires banked, and my doors bolted tight.—
O what is laurel when the blood runs thin?
This afternoon I made my truce with Time.
I signed a contract to play characters
With a new stock, opening in Omaha.
Dowagers in white wigs, or grandmothers,
Or timid maiden ladies past their prime.—
I leave at midnight, and I have my part
To study on the train. It is six sides—
A negro mammy in farce comedy. . .
Ladies and gentlemen, you liked my work?
I shall keep your flowers in my memory.

PERPETUUM MOBILE

To

Philip Moeller

PERPETUUM MOBILE

BLESSED is she who tires and goes,
Ere the man must go to another.—
His heart may break,
If she forsake,
But she cannot satisfy.

Dowerless the daughter of Eve—
She may light a man to his ruin;
Yet her lips' gift
Sets him adrift,
And drives him to her sister!

O QUANTA SPECIES CEREBRUM NON HABET

I AM not hurt because you have betrayed
My love, and left me for my enemies;
But had you lingered till joy's ghost was laid
You had not robbed me of my memories.

SPRING ECSTASY

SHE kissed the young wind with her honey mouth—
Her voice brushed Time's wings in a cadent rune;
Her feet, more white for twilight, sought the South
To bathe in April water of the moon!

SHEPHERDESS IN GRAMERCY PARK

HER breath suspired in a little sigh—
Of plausive aspect, with upturned eye
She begged a boon from Him on high :
A softer breeze for her butterfly!

PENETRALIA

I HAD all I wanted,
Ere you found me,—
And with words that haunted
Love enwound me
In a joy that taunted
You who bound me.

You will not awaken
From your dreaming
Till you are forsaken
By my gleaming
Soul that has been shaken
Past redeeming!

PYRGOPOLINICES: OF LOTHAR DISCREET

HE held his stick as though it were a sword;
He held his head as though he were the Word;
He held his mouth as though he had been heard;
He held his eyes as though nought had occurred.

BONFIRE OF KINGS

To

James E. Richardson

BONFIRE OF KINGS

KINGSHIP is passing down the yellow road,
And crowns are dangling from the willow
tree;

Royalty flees to seek a last abode
With the other outcasts of eternity.

The palaces are burning, for bad kings
Have brought the breaking of the whitest dream
That man has ever dreamt—imaginings
That bathed the throne with a diviner gleam.

The mob is jiggling to a ribald air
That mocks the dying pulse of sovereignty;
Humanity is singing everywhere
All men are equal. Dupes of democracy!

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